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ABSTRACT

To examine the agenda-building process in local television news, a study collected data in the newsroom of a network-affiliate television station in Indianapolis, Indiana, during a four-week period. Assignment editors and producers were observed as they selected from among the information subsidies they received in the mail (including news releases, meeting announcements, magazines, press kits, invitations, and information about satellite feeds or videotapes); all items discarded were saved for analysis, and items kept for the station's future file were noted. Findings indicated: (1) that news decision-makers discarded 78% of the information subsidies and kept 22% (in this first filtering); (2) that information from non-profit organizations and interest groups was kept most frequently, while that from government-related sources and businesses was kept least frequently; (3) that subsidies with a city setting were kept most frequently, with a lower proportion of state and national stories retained; and (4) that planned event items were kept much more frequently than informative material, though 68% of the information subsidies received were informative materials rather than event-related. The keys to successful information subsidy appeared to be local relevance and the ability to provide concrete news events. (Four tables of data and 22 notes are included.) (SR)

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INFORMATION SUBSIDY AND AGENDA-BUILDING IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

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INFORMATION SUBSIDY AND AGENDA-BUILDING IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

Most research concerning the agenda-setting effect focuses on the relationship between mass media content and the mass media audience.[1] Research in a related area, information subsidy, has taken a different tack, looking at the relationship between news sources and the mass media as the news agenda is formed.[2]

"Agenda-building" is a term used to describe the overall process of creating mass media agendas, of which information subsidy is a part.[3] A distinction between the agenda-building and information-subsidy perspectives is that agenda-building focuses on dynamics of the process; information-subsidy, in contrast, assumes where influence lies in the process -- with the source -- and attempts to assess the magnitude of that influence.

The purpose of this study is to examine the agenda-building process in local television news. The focus here is on the first filtering in the process, where news sources provide subsidized information to journalists, and journalists in turn draw potential news stories from among

those in the heap. Data come from actual subsidized information received by a network-affiliate television news department, and allow for an examination of not only what made its way into the news mix, but also what didn't.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

The relationship between journalists and news sources has often been described as a symbiosis among friendly adversaries.[4] Often, a large part of the news process involves sources' provision of information that is subsequently shaped by the journalists who report it.[5] Because news organizations must spend money for equipment and personnel to gather the raw information from which news is made, every story that is reported carries a cost. News sources, cognizant of this expense, make efforts to reduce the cost of their own information for news organizations with hopes of thereby influencing the news agenda.[6]

News sources also seek to gain influence in the agenda-building process by shaping their information to journalists' needs. Timing of information release is carefully considered in order to match news organizations' deadlines,[7] as are sources' efforts to create concrete events that reduce journalists' costs for gathering and processing of information.[8] Sources holding greater credibility and social power increase the effectiveness of their agenda-building efforts, through their enhanced ability to create and supply news to journalists.[9]

Studies attempting to assess the power of sources in agenda-building have taken two main approaches. One route has been to examine the outcome of the process. This has been accomplished by analyzing the content of newspapers or television and then drawing conclusions about the proportion of stories that appear to have been covered because of news sources' efforts.[10] These studies have concluded that between one-half and two-thirds of the news content of newspapers and television have been source originated, either because of news releases from sources, or because of source-created news events. Some evidence has suggested that television news contains a larger proportion of source-originated stories[11] because of television's greater constraints related to personnel, equipment, and expenses.[12]

Output-oriented studies considering a broad range of news sources -- government, business, and other organizations -- also suggest that about one-third to one-half of news stories concern government-related topics.[13]

A second route for examining the role of sources in the news process has been to look at inputs, the raw material from which news is developed. Sources can gain access to the news media through a number of channels -- news releases, telephone calls, press conferences, in-person contacts, satellite feeds, and videotapes. Of the studies focusing on inputs, news releases often have been the main focus.

A study of information subsidies from state government public information officers found that about half of the

handouts provided to journalists resulted in publication.[14] At the national level, a four-week study of White House handouts (news releases, speech texts, interview transcripts, legislation drafts, personnel announcements) found that about one-third of the materials appeared to have been used in published stories.[15]

These input-oriented studies also have found that government-originated subsidies are used more often than subsidies from other kinds of organizations.[16] Accordingly, subsidized information from an Oklahoma university was accepted at an even lower percentage than the government-focused studies have found.[17] Daily and weekly newspapers published less than ten percent of the materials sent by the university, although bi-weekly papers used a larger proportion, nearly 22 percent. Of all the subsidies used, consumer information was used more frequently than event-related news, feature stories, or research summaries. This finding appears to conflict with other studies that have discovered a news media emphasis on event orientation,[18] but is likely related to the particular types of events that the university attempted to promote.

Other studies of subsidized information found that newspapers use from five to ten percent of the news releases that organizations provide.[19] Lack of a local angle was a common reason for rejection, as were lack of newsworthiness, an overemphasis on self-serving information, a lack of conciseness, and late delivery of materials.

In summary, studies of the outcome of the news process suggest that news sources play a large role in shaping the mass media's news agenda. Studies of inputs into the process, in contrast, show that the majority of news sources' efforts are not successful. In other words, a large amount of source-originated information appears on the news agenda, but only a small proportion of the information provided by sources to journalists actually achieves success. This implies that a large proportion of information subsidies ultimately fail to influence the news agenda.

The preceding discussion suggests the following relationships concerning information subsidies in the agenda-building process:

1) Subsidies concerning event-related news will be used more often than items presenting informative material.

2) The news setting for successful subsidies will most commonly be within the city where a media organization is located.

3) The originating organizations most successful with subsidies used by journalists will be government-affiliated organizations and organizations not oriented toward self-serving promotion.

METHOD

Data for this study were collected in the newsroom of a network-affiliate television station in Indianapolis, Indiana (market size 24) during a four week period in October and

November 1987. For each of fourteen days (Monday through Thursday of each week, except for one Tuesday and one Wednesday), assignment editors and producers were observed as they selected from the information subsidies they received in the mail. All items discarded by these news decision-makers were saved for analysis. These items included news releases, meeting announcements, magazines, newsletters, brochures, press kits, invitations, and information about satellite feeds or videotapes.

The name of the originating organization and a summary sentence describing the subject of the information were recorded for each item kept for the station's future file. A large portion of the original materials were made available later, when the assignment editor emptied the contents of each day's future file. These subsidies were not necessarily used in a newscast; instead, they just made the first cut.

Two people shared coding of 1,023 pieces of subsidized information. Coder reliability averaged 93 percent over the following three measures:

- Story type: preplanned events (attendable meetings, rallies, press conferences, special activities); informational material (concerning issues, past events, and events in other parts of the country).
- News setting: city; state; national.

- Originating organization: business; education; government/politics; interest groups; non-profit organizations.

Other data collected for this study included notes from two months of newsroom observation and transcripts from interviews with ten news decision-makers. Some of this information will be included in the discussion to further explore the quantitative findings.

RESULTS

Of the materials analyzed, news decision-makers discarded 78 percent of the subsidies and retained 22 percent. This information does not present the exact percentage of items that were kept, because the station occasionally received duplicate copies of items; sometimes they kept one copy and discarded the other.

Seventy-four percent of the 1,023 items were news releases, public service announcements, meeting notices, or tip sheets; 11 percent were magazines or newsletters; 5 percent were brochures, programs or invitations; 4 percent were press kits or promotional items; 3 percent concerned video and satellite news releases; and the remaining 3 percent were miscellaneous items.

TABLE 1 about here

Table 1 presents a crosstabulation of information subsidies that were discarded or kept according to the kind of organization that originated the information. Information from non-profit organizations and interest groups was kept most frequently, while subsidies from government-related sources and businesses were kept least frequently. The relationships in the table were statistically significant at $p < .001$.

TABLE 2 about here

Table 2 presents an analysis of the information subsidies according to the news setting of the story. Subsidies with a city setting were kept most frequently, with a lower proportion of state and national stories retained. Again, the relationships are statistically significant at $p < .001$.

TABLE 3 about here

Table 3 examines information subsidies according to story type. As expected, planned event items were kept much more frequently than informative material. The relationships were statistically significant at $p < .001$.

TABLE 4 about here

Table 4 presents a crosstabulation of kinds of organizations according to the news setting of the subsidized information. Government subsidies were almost evenly divided into city and state news settings. Subsidies from businesses were split closely between city and national settings. Interest group subsidies were most frequently concerned news set in the city, with a large proportion located in national settings, as well. Nearly all the non-profit organization subsidies were based on a city setting. And a large proportion of education-originated subsidies were located in a state setting. These relationships were statistically significant at $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

This study found that the television journalists who were studied kept a larger proportion of information subsidies than much of the past research. That finding, however, needs to be tempered. Here, the focus was only on the first filtering of the news process. Subsidies that were retained still had to be listed on a news budget, selected at a morning story conference, and then survive the day on a newscast lineup before they were actually used. The percentage of subsidies that actually became news stories likely would be much lower than the 22 percent that were retained by journalists in this study.

Among the other findings, some results were in agreement with the existing literature and some were divergent. In

particular, the breakdown of subsidies according to organizational type was unexpected. Most studies have found that media organizations have a tendency toward government originated subsidies. Here, a greater proportion of subsidies was kept from interest groups and non-profit organizations instead.

A tendency toward certain topics might be one explanation for this result, although the association between a story's topic and the kind of organization that originated it isn't necessarily a perfect link. For example, an educational institution might provide an information subsidy concerning a business topic. One producer who was interviewed suggested that the station placed greater emphasis on consumer news, medical news, and financial news, rather than government-related stories. The news director took this point further:

> Political stories may not be on as much, except around election time. I think the great populace out there isn't interested in politics... Health and economic issues are going to get on. The arts probably don't get on as much. I guess people want to believe that [kind of] stuff appeals to only a small segment of the audience.

The distribution among the settings of retained subsidies was basically what would be expected: subsidies from more proximate news sources were retained at a higher rate than those from farther away. This is a common sense result, because local news organizations are more likely to cover news relevant to their local audiences. In addition, news based in a city setting requires a smaller expenditure

of time, equipment, and personnel. Further, the literature cited earlier pointed out that a common complaint about news releases and other subsidized material is lack of a local news angle.[20]

That planned event-related subsidies were retained more often than subsidies concerning informative material was also not surprising. In general, journalists tend to cover planned events simply because planned events provide something concrete to cover. The assistant news director explained:

> We get millions of those [informative material] that come in as press releases, and you keep looking for a date [meaning an event to be covered]. What is there to do if there isn't anything going on? It's a lot easier to cover a planned event.

A weekend producer continued with this point:

> Generally, the path of least resistance wins out. Probably 50 percent of our news is handed to us, it's set up, it's a media event.

Discussions with the news decision-makers pointed out that in television news, journalists initially lean toward planned events because those events offer a chance for creating a newscast lineup earlier in the day. Those event-related stories aren't always the ones that are broadcast, however. The station's assignment editor put it this way:

> ... we fill out the show early [with planned events] and then we begin to plug in spot news that's unscheduled. Some of the planned items then get bumped out.

Despite the common sense nature of the findings above, this study affords the chance for something more -- to look at what doesn't make its way into the news. In this study,

78 percent of the information subsidies were discarded. One of the station's producers amplifies this point:

> Everybody wants on TV, because they feel that by being on TV, they can get much more visibility than with any other medium. Some things you don't even consider, you just throw them in the wastebasket. We get things from China and from other states. Others are just blatantly commercial.

A second examination of Table 2 documents this point. Information subsidies with a state or national news setting comprised 54 percent of all subsidies, yet 89 percent of these state and national stories was discarded. This suggests that a large proportion of news sources from outside of the television station's most proximate viewing area were trying to enter the news agenda, but were turned away at the first stage.

A likely explanation lies in the public relations process, indicating a shotgun approach to news dissemination. Grunig and Hunt estimate that 65 percent of all organizations practice within one of two public relations models called "press agentry" and "public information."[21] These models portray a simple one-way dissemination of information, rather than an attempt to understand the information needs of the mass media and relevant organizational audiences. Further, many public relations practitioners -- the people responsible for creating and disseminating most information subsidies -- evaluate their results not on whether their target audiences are reached, but simply on whether they have gained media coverage.[22] In a nutshell, they are counting publicity clips

as a measure of success; the more information subsidies that are provided, the more publicity clips can be counted.

Another look at Table 3 shows that 700 subsidies, 68 percent of all that were received, were informative materials rather than event-related. Eighty-seven percent of these non-event subsidies were discarded. The producer's point about the irrelevance of many information subsidies suggests once again that many news sources are taking a shotgun approach, choking and cluttering the communication process with self-serving materials, rather than enhancing it.

The information in Table 4 also fits neatly into this argument. Of the subsidies provided by businesses, 43 percent were based in a national setting. Subsidies from interest groups were about the same, with 39 percent of them in a national setting. These kinds of subsidies are essentially self-serving pieces of promotion, with little relevance to the actual viewing audience. None of the other three categories of organizations had even half that proportion of nationally based stories.

CONCLUSIONS

This study looked at subsidized information in local television news and found that less than a quarter of news sources' efforts to shape the news agenda were successful in making the first cut. A large proportion of the subsidies appeared to be shotgun attempts at promotion, rather than concerted efforts to enhance communication of information.

Local relevance and the ability to provide concrete news events appeared to be keys to successful information subsidy. Savvy news sources, indeed, appear to be able to enter into the agenda-building process, but this study found that savvy news sources didn't seem to be the norm.

These findings suggest the possibility of two simultaneous levels of agenda-building in local TV news. The first and most important level concerns the relationship between local news sources -- mainly within the city -- and television journalists. At this level, sources vie for a place on a news agenda in which they have a stake. Efforts are more carefully directed at gaining news coverage. The second level of agenda-building seems less purposive. Here, news sources from outside the local area, and even from outside of the state try to gain access on an agenda with which they are only indirectly involved. These efforts appear haphazard, a simple act of publicity rather than an intentional act of agenda-building.

Notes

[1]Maxwell McCombs and Sheldon Gilbert, "News Influence on Our Pictures of the World," in Perspectives on Media Effects, eds. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), pp. 1-15. Judy VanSlyke Turk and Bob Franklin, "Information Subsidies: Agenda-Setting Traditions," Public Relations Review, 13:4 (1987), pp. 29-41.

[2]For example, Judy VanSlyke Turk, "Information Subsidies and Media Content: A Study of Public Relations Influence on the News," Journalism Monographs, No. 100 (December, 1986).

[3]Dan Berkowitz, "TV News Sources and News Channels: A Study in Agenda-Building," Journalism Quarterly, 64:508-513 (1987); Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). David H. Weaver and Swanzy Nimley Elliott, "Who Sets the Agenda for the Media?" Journalism Quarterly, 62:88-94

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[6]Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1982), pp. 10-14.

[7]Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1973), p. 102.

[8]Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

[9]Gans, pp. 116-145; S. Holly Stocking, "Effect of Public Relations Efforts on Media Visibility of Organizations," Journalism Quarterly, 62: 358-366.

[10]Berkowitz, "TV News Sources..."; Jane Delano Brown, Carl R. Bybee, Stanley T. Weardon, and Dulcie Straughan, "Invisible Power: Newspaper News Sources and the Limits of Diversity," Journalism Quarterly, 64: 45-54 (1987); Sigal, Reporters and Officials...; Guido H. Stempel III, "Topic and Story Choice of Five Network Newscasts," Journalism Quarterly, 65: 750-756 (1988). Turk, "Information Subsidies and Media Content...".

[11]Berkowitz, "TV News Sources..."

[12]Sharon Dunwoody, "Science Writers at Work," Research Report No. 7, Center for New Communications, Indiana University, 1978; Edward Jay Epstein, News from Nowhere: Television and the News (New York: Vintage Books, 1974)

[13]Berkowitz, "TV News Sources..."; Brown et al., "Invisible Power..."; Sigal, Reporters and Officials....

[14]Turk, "Information Subsidies and Media Content..."

[15]Judy VanSlyke Turk, "Between President and Press: White House Public Information and Its Influence on the News Media," paper presented to the AEJMC annual convention, San Antonio, TX, August 1987.

[16]David L. Altheide, Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976); Dan G. Drew, "Roles and Decision Making of Three Television Beat Reporters," Journal of Broadcasting, 16: 165-73 (1972); Gans, Deciding What's News; Sae Kyung Seo, "Major Attributes of Sources Which Influence Selection of Sources in News Coverage," paper presented to the AEJMC annual convention, Portland, OR, July 1988.

[17]Linda P. Morton, "How Newspapers Choose the Releases They Use," Public Relations Review, 12:3 (1986), pp. 22-27.

[18]Mark Fishman, Manufacturing the News (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1980); Gaye Tuchman, Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality (New York: Free Press, 1978).

[19]Bill L. Baxter, "The News Release: An Idea Whose Time Has Gone?" in Precision Public Relations, ed. Ray Eldon Hiebert (New York: Longman, 1988), pp. 219-223.

[20]Baxter, "The News Release..."

[21]James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winton, 1984), p. 22.

[22]Walter Lindenmann, "Beyond the Clipbook," Public Relations Journal, December 1988.

TABLE 1

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES DISCARDED/KEPT
BY KIND OF ORGANIZATION

Kind of organization	Discarded	Kept	TOTAL %	TOTAL N
Non-profit organization	66%	34%	100%	125
Interest group	67	33	100	163
Education	79	21	100	195
Business	82	18	100	276
Government/politics	84	16	100	263
TOTAL	78%	22%	100%	1022

Chi-Square=29.76 degrees of freedom=4 $p < .001$

(undefined observations = 1)

TABLE 2

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES DISCARDED/KEPT
BY NEWS SETTING

News setting	Discarded	Kept	TOTAL %	TOTAL N
City	64%	36%	100%	464
State	86	14	100	321
National	93	7	100	234
TOTAL	78%	22%	100%	1019

Chi-square=96.17 degrees of freedom=2 $p < .001$

(undefined observations = 4)

TABLE 3

INFORMATION SUBSIDIES DISCARDED/KEPT
BY STORY TYPE

Story type	Discarded	Kept	TOTAL %	TOTAL N
Planned event information	57	43	100%	323
Informative material	87%	13%	100%	700
TOTAL	78%	22%	100%	1023

Chi-square=109.28 degrees of freedom=1 $p < .001$

(undefined observations = 0)

TABLE 4

ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING INFORMATION SUBSIDIES
BY NEWS SETTING OF SUBSIDY

Organization	City	State	National	TOTAL %	TOTAL N
Non-profit organization	82%	11%	7%	100%	125
Interest group	50	11	39	100	162
Education	32	67	1	100	195
Business	42	15	43	100	273
Government/politics	40	44	16	100	263
TOTAL	45%	32%	23%	100	1018

Chi-square=344.33 degrees of freedom=8 $p < .001$

(undefined observations = 5)